Revolution: The Prison Rebellion Years, 1968-1972

A zine adapted from chapter 3 of Dan Berger and Toussaint Losier's *Rethinking the American Prison Movement*

Adapted by Safear Ness
Cover art by Paul Lacombe

“Armed with knowledge of our past we can charter a course for our future. Only by knowing where we've been can we know where we are and look to where we want to go.”

— Malcolm X

To Begin a Revolution

Revolution was in the air. In the late 1960s, across the U.S., urban and prison rebellion engulfed the country. Sides were being drawn. On the left, progressive revolutionaries were fighting for a more equitable society. On the right, conservative reactionaries were determined to maintain the capitalist status quo. For many it seemed that an American revolution, if not a global revolution, was inevitable.

A central site of revolutionary organizing and action occurred in the nation’s prisons and jails. Termed the “prison rebellion years” by formerly incarcerated poet Raul Salinas, 1968 to 1972 was the greatest era of American prison revolt. In 1968, there were 15 prison riots. By 1970, the number increased to 27, then 37 in 1971,

culminating in 48 riots in 1972, “the most in any one year of US history.”[1]

This wave of prison rebellions followed years of urban rebellion and radical organizing by Black Power and New Left radicals. Every summer since 1964, in cities as diverse as Watts, Detroit, and Newark, everyday people lit flames of protest against anti-Black policing, racist discrimination in employment and housing, and American imperialism, particularly the war in Vietnam. Black nationalist, Indigenous liberation, and leftist groups of all stripes garnered an extraordinary level of participation. After the assassination of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in April 1968, there were more than 100 uprisings. Both Democratic President Lyndon Johnson and Republican President Richard Nixon embraced “law and order” tactics aimed at cracking down on this unprecedented wave of protests and revolutionary activity through the militarization and expansion of policing.

Despite the state’s counter-attack, this revolutionary energy migrated to and

[1] All quotes are from *Rethinking the American Prison Movement* unless otherwise noted.

gained traction inside the nation's prisons and jails, where the systemic racism and state-sanctioned violence in America's cities was equally present and intense. During this period, rates of Black incarceration rose, even as overall rates of incarceration declined. As radical social movements were targeting the racist oppression inherent to the criminal punishment system, prisons and jails were being filled with "young men of color in the prime of their lives" experiencing the routine violence, abuse, and neglect present in prisons and jails everywhere. This "convergence" helped create conditions necessary for mass prisoner revolts, where disproportionately Black and Latinx prisoners from California to New York exposed the myth of rehabilitation, demanded humane treatment, and expanded an abolitionist horizon.

Keeping pace with social movements, incarcerated people linked their critique of the prison system to the systemic conditions of:

<u>Racism:</u> "The state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to

premature death." (definition from Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag)*

Capitalism: A socio-economic system based especially on private ownership of the means of production and the exploitation of the labor force. In such a society, the working classes (called "proletariat") are fooled into believing that they are free because they are paid for their labor. In fact, the transformation of labor into an abstract quantity that can be bought and sold on the market leads to the exploitation of the proletariat, benefitting a small percentage of the population in control of capital. The working class thus experiences alienation since the members of this class feel they are not in control of the forces driving them into a given job. The reason for this situation is that someone else owns the means of production - or the tools or raw material used to create a product – which are treated like private property.

Imperialism: "Imperialism has two primary meanings. **The first refers to the expansion of a nation-state through force and violence into territories, contiguous or noncontiguous, by taking over land or 'holding political dominion**

or control over dependent territories,' as the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED Online*, 'imperialism,' n.d.) puts it, or some combination of the two. The second meaning focuses on what the *OED* refers to as 'the extension and maintenance of a country's power or influence' through 'commercial imperialism, economic imperialism; cultural, dollar, linguistic imperialism.' Both land and influence-based forms of imperialism, which often overlap in practice, are inseparable from gender and sexuality in terms of how imperial nation-states and sites of empire are imagined as well as in imperialism's entanglement with formations of race, gender, and sexuality, such as the white patriarchal family, in struggles over land and political, economic, and cultural power." (Shelley Streeby, "Imperialism," *Keywords for Gender and Sexuality Studies*.)

The prison rebellion years produced an era of heightened revolutionary theory and praxis, where both imprisoned people and allies in the free world articulated a critical analysis of imprisonment as racialized class war and a radical vision of prison abolition. Prisoner organizing often obliterated social

categories which normally kept incarcerated people divided; such as by race, (so-called) gang tensions, and religious differences. The wars waged in captivity pushed groups to unite for survival. Some even declared that they were part of a “convict-class” or “convict race.”

In their unity, many incarcerated people shunned gradual reform, instead opting to embrace a radical analysis that demanded an end to the systemic oppression they faced. Within that fight, prisoners struggled against physical and sexual abuse, deprivation of political and religious freedom, and a lack of due process at every level of the criminal punishment system. They also pushed back against prisons’ new experimentation with rehabilitative punishment in the form of indeterminate sentencing which combined therapeutic behavior management with literary access called bibliotherapy – aka, pseudo-rehabilitation.

Incarcerated peoples’ radical analysis transcended prison walls, providing prisoners with an unprecedented amount of support from those who were not incarcerated. Some organizations such as

the Black Panther Party (BPP), Young Lords Party (YLP), and the Republic of New Afrika (RNA), among others, worked closely with prisoners, providing education and legal services. These organizations often recruited formerly and currently incarcerated people, or continued their organizing after becoming incarcerated themselves. The connection between inside and outside accomplices resulted in remarkable accomplishments for the prison movement. Like the bricks in a house, each strengthened the other.

As was the case for revolutionary activities in the free world, the prison rebellion years prompted reactionary forces to suppress and muzzle imprisoned rebels. In direct response to prisoners' radical organizing and action, political elites across the political spectrum worked to expand the state's capacity to criminalize and punish, channeling millions upon millions into expanding militarized, racist policing and instituting increasingly repressive forms of correctional control across the nation. Incarcerated revolutionaries became targets for tougher isolation units, or prisons inside of a prison, built for lengthy terms of solitary

confinement. Due to the growth of such harsh and repressive measures, the revolutionary movement which seemed ready to triumph would eventually decline. Prominent organizations facing unprecedented assault from a reactionary and anti-Black security state were left fractured, unable to regroup and rebuild. Some went underground, committed to armed struggle against the government until they themselves were captured or killed. And still others chose to re-theorize and plan for the future of the movement.

This zine is a part of that history.

One of the most important lessons from the prison rebellion years is the fact that, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, prisoner rebellions and radical organizing successfully communicated the racist violence underlying incarceration to the masses and disrupted a carceral status quo, making the future of prisons "up for grabs." While reactionary political elites and social movements quickly foreclosed and beat back this opening, ***this history demonstrates that the prison has–and can still be–challenged and dismantled/abolished.***

San Quentin Strike of 1968

In February 1968, an underground newspaper, *The Outlaw*, circulated around San Quentin prison in California. Inside, incarcerated rebel journalists for the paper called for a strike against injustices occurring in the prison. They demanded “parole reform, better food and living conditions, increased wages for labor, and moving people convicted of sexual offenses against children to mental institutions.”

Prison officials cracked down on the newspaper and transferred suspected journalists to other prisons. But the paper kept reappearing.

Outside of prison, the *Berkeley Barb*, one of the largest underground newspapers in the country, reprinted *The Outlaw*’s writings to support the upcoming strike at San Quentin.

On February 15th, San Quentin prisoners went on strike, refusing to leave their cells. At first 20% of the prison population participated. But the small number of strikers didn’t deter them. Contrary to popular prisoner belief, you don't need every prisoner to participate in a strike. Sometimes, it just takes leading by example.

At the prison gates over 400 outside supporters protested in solidarity with incarcerated strikers. Rock bands, including the Grateful Dead, joined them and performed a free concert on the back of a flatbed truck.

“For the rest of the week, more than 2,600 people, about 75% of the prison population, went on strike.”

This was just the beginning.

The Black Panther Party (BPP)

Originally founded in Oakland, California by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale in 1966, the Black Panther Party for Self Defense was at the forefront of organizing against policing and prisons, which they helped theorize as central sites of anti-Black violence. The Panthers developed a radical political platform calling for the liberation of

all Black and oppressed people. Inspired by Malcolm X’s Black nationalism and Marxist/Maoist theory, much of their focus was organizing the Black working class in America and linking their organization with broader international liberation movements fighting for freedom from racist and imperial repression.

Many of the BPP’s recruits were formerly and currently incarcerated people. They considered prisoners to be the natural extension of the Black working class, which was their base. Along with their other survival programs, they also ran the Free Commissary for Prisoners Program and the Free Busing to Prisons Program. Their focus on the criminal punishment system stemmed from the oppression they witnessed in Black working class communities, as well as their own experience being targeted by police.

The BPP famously provided free essential services to Black communities, such as the Free Breakfast program, healthcare, education, and clothing. They also implemented armed patrols of the police, hoping to prevent officers from oppressing the Black community. These

tactics fostered resentment from law enforcement – FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover declared the Panthers “the greatest threat to the internal security of the United States.” One of the more infamous efforts to destroy the BPP and other Black Power groups was the Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO), whereby the FBI carried out a series of undercover and unconstitutional projects aimed at disrupting and fomenting discord among US Black and leftist groups.

Local law enforcement surveilled and targeted the BPP, too. As part of their surveillance of the BPP, the Oakland police kept a list of all known Panther vehicles. During the early morning hours of October 28th, 1967, Officer John Frey spotted one such vehicle. He called for backup and pulled it over. In the car was Huey Newton. Soon an altercation broke out. Frey, who had been previously implicated in numerous incidents of racism, was killed and Newton was shot in the stomach.

The Panthers rallied behind Newton, who had been thrown in jail pending trial, and campaigned for his defense. Panther Minister of Information Eldridge Cleaver

led the “Free Huey'' campaign, making the Panthers a household name, with chapters of the Party springing up around the country. In California, and the Bay Area in particular, radical prison organizing increased as Newton continued to lead the party from jail. In 1970, for example, when 21 BPP members in one of the biggest chapters in New York were charged with planning to bomb a series of city landmarks and thrown in jail, they organized a citywide jail rebellion and published a collective autobiography from jail that linked their struggles to a long history of Black oppositional politics.

Military Rebellion

As the Panthers fought racist policing and criminalization in Oakland, anti-war resistors escalated their protests against the war in Vietnam. Protests materialized in cities and college campuses across the country. Many protesters refused to participate in the draft, even burning their draft cards on public display. In response, federal authorities had them arrested. Some spent years in federal prison for refusing to participate in the war.

The war in Vietnam caused internal dissention among the US military personnel too. Many soldiers, particularly Black soldiers, were incarcerated for infractions such as smoking marijuana or refusing to deploy. Racism in the military had long been rampant, provoking protests from Black soldiers who did enlist. In 1968, angered by both the government's imperialist war and the racism in their ranks, more than 40 Black GIs staged a sit-in at Fort Hood, Texas, in protest against orders that they repress protestors at the Democratic National Convention. That same year, a group of Black and white GIs at North Carolina's Fort Bragg took control of the stockade for 48 hours to protest the beating of a Black prisoner. Just a few weeks after, US soldiers who had been imprisoned for refusing to fight, doing drugs, or going AWOL launched a prison rebellion and seized the central compound at Da Nang for 20 hours; soon after they set their cellblocks on fire. By the end of the month, soldiers imprisoned at another US-run jail, Long Binh, which was 90% Black, deeply overcrowded, and notoriously abusive, sustained the biggest uprising in a military stockade

in U.S. history. Military rebellions would continue over the next four years across American bases in the US, Vietnam, and Germany.

From left, Pfc. Ernest Bess, Atty. Michael Kennedy, Pfc. Guy Smith, Sp/4 Albert Henry, Pvt. Ernest Frederick, Sgt. Robert Rucker, Sp/4 Tollie Royal. October 1968 at Fort Hood, Texas. Source: Ellen Catalinotto / Zinn Educational Project

The Long Binh Jail Mess Hall Building, burned down by inmates. Source: National Archives/Courtesy of Displaced Films

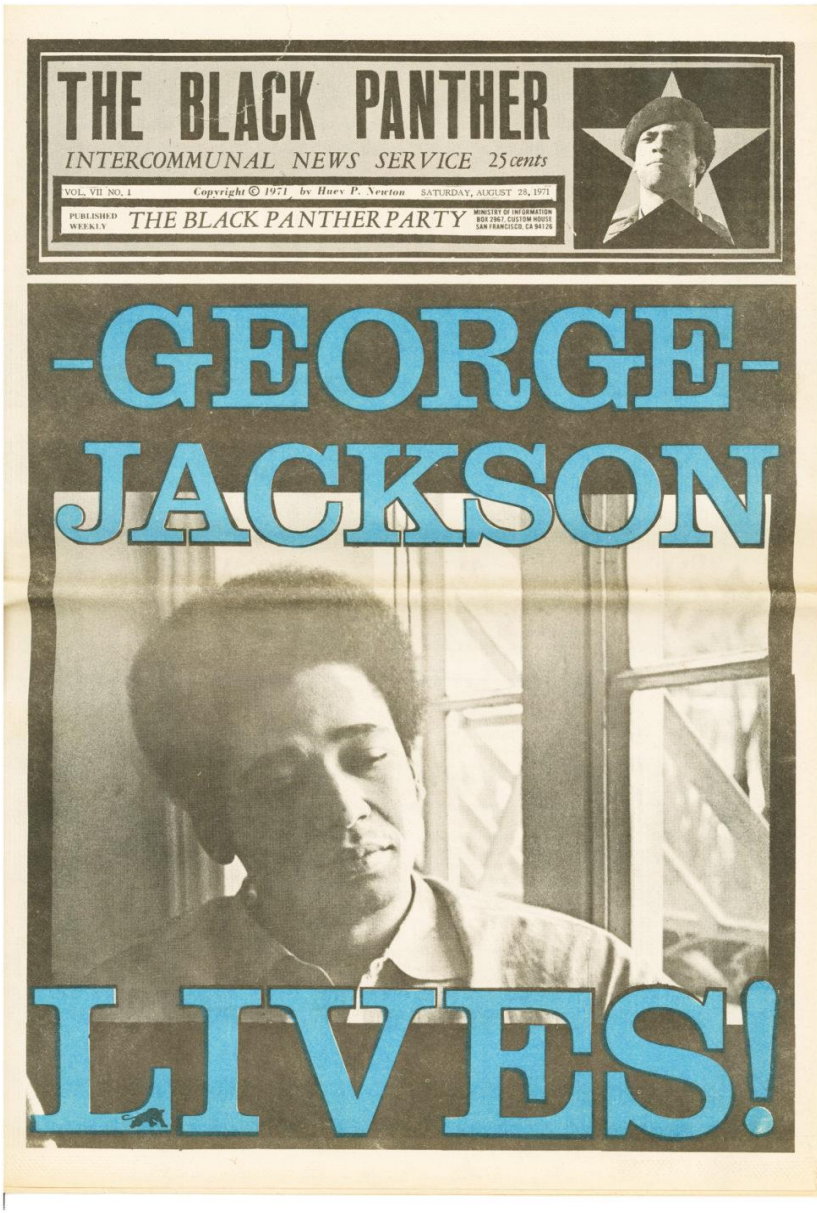
State Repression

In response to years of urban unrest and the ascent of antiracist and anti-imperialist movements, political elites on both sides of the aisle rushed to expand the criminal punishment system and suppress further growth in revolutionary consciousness. Democratic President Lyndon Johnson, for example, created the Office of Law Enforcement Assistance, later called the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA), which would give tens of millions of dollars to police agencies over the next decade. Along with the Safe Streets Act, this agency would fuel the expansion of an increasingly militarized police force across the country. It also funneled funds to states and localities for prison construction. This massive investment in policing and prisons would raise substantial barriers for radical social movements and laid the groundwork for the rise of mass incarceration in the late-twentieth century.

As if things couldn’t get worse, hardline conservative Republican Richard Nixon won the 1968 presidential

election. Campaigning on a law-and-order platform, Nixon promised to fix a country “plagued by lawlessness.” Soon after taking office, the political repression of progressives increased dramatically. All of this emboldened anti-Black reactionaries and imperialists hellbent on undercutting newly passed civil rights laws and continuing the war in Vietnam. Many Black Power and New Left groups faced heightened threats from law enforcement. Many were charged with crimes, thrown into jail, and sometimes convicted and sentenced to lengthy prison terms. Others who managed to evade authorities elected to go underground. Alongside their assault on the revolutionary groups best equipped to organize against Nixon’s repressive regime, his administration ramped up the criminalization and targeting of Black working-class people more broadly, such as using discretionary LEAA funds to fuel prison construction and encouraging the proliferation of aggressive patrol strategies in Black working-class neighborhoods, sending scores of disproportionately Black Americans to prison during the prime of their life. In part because of the state’s tough crackdown on revolutionary social

movements in the free world, the struggle against racist fascism flourished in the nation’s prisons and jails, where political and politicized prisoners organized against racialized state violence.



Soledad Brothers

One of the most significant episodes of the prison movement occurred at California's Soledad prison, a medium-maximum security men's prison. Racial tensions between Black prisoners and white guards and white prisoners had been escalating for years. In 1970, they finally exploded on the Soledad Prison's racially integrated exercise yard, when Clarence Causey, a Black prisoner was stabbed and killed. The violence led guards to lock down the prison, but they continued to instigate and worsen tensions between white and Black prisoners. After restricting access for more than a year, Soledad guards reopened the prison on January 13th, 1970, allowing eight white prisoners (among them Billie "Buzzard" Harris, leader of the white supremacist group Aryan Brotherhood) and seven Black prisoners to congregate. Among the Black prisoners was W.L. Nolen, a respected prison boxing champion who studied Black nationalism and mentored Black imprisoned revolutionary George Jackson. Nolen had previously filed a lawsuit claiming that prison guards were trying to kill him – a fact that would serve as an eerie foreshadowing of the events to come on the yard. He even wrote to his mother that he feared for his life.

When a fist fight broke out in the yard, Soledad guard Opie G. Miller, a 20-year army veteran and expert marksman, opened fire on the Black prisoners without warning. Miller shot Nolen first, then Cleveland Edwards who had gone to help the injured Nolen. Next Miller shot Alvin “Jug” Edwards. All outspoken Black militants, the men were shot in the chest and left in the prison yard for 20 minutes. All three died that night. Only one white prisoner sustained injuries from a ricocheting bullet.

Soon the prison erupted into open rebellion with fistfights popping off on numerous blocks. Black prisoners went on hunger strike, burned prison furniture, and dispatched voluminous amounts of mail to their families, attorneys and state officials, demanding an investigation.

Three days later, prisoners listened to the radio as the District Attorney announced that the killing of prisoners were “justifiable homicide.” Some prisoners concluded that the law offered them no recourse. Later that night, a new Soledad guard, 26-year-old John Mills, was beaten and thrown to his

death off the third tier of the prison's Y wing. It was widely understood that the attack came in retaliation for the killing of the three prisoners.

Given the intensity of the guards' violence towards them, some prisoners thought they would only be safe if the guards feared the consequences of their actions. Between 1970 and 1971, nine guards and 24 prisoners were killed in a new phase of retaliatory violence outside California prisons.
Prison officials responded to Mills' death by focusing their investigation on George Jackson. A 28-year-old prisoner, Jackson was an outspoken Black revolutionary who participated in study groups and taught prisoners karate, among other things. After being sentenced to one year to life for a $70 gas station robbery, he became close to Nolen and gained a reputation for aggressive protests, including challenging guards and white prisoners, throughout his 10 years in California prisons.

On February 23rd, 1970, Jackson was charged with Mills' killing along with two other men, John Clutchett and Fleeta Drumgo, both also convicted of minor

crimes, despite the three of them barely knowing each other.

Jackson’s radical organizing against anti-Black state violence in California’s prison system and his targeted persecution by prison officials helped spark a nationwide prisoner movement, bridging together imprisoned and free world activists in the struggle against criminalization and imprisonment. Huey Newton, who heard of George Jackson’s resistance and radical politics from other Black prisoners while he himself was incarcerated, helped forge a critical link between Jackson, Black prisoners, and the Black Panther party. Huey also had his lawyer, Fay Stender, look into Jackson’s case, and she became Jackson’s attorney. Calling the three defendants the Soledad brothers, she co-founded the Soledad Brothers Defense Committee. Soon chapters of the committee sprang up across California.

Angela Davis, a prominent young activist and philosophy professor, became a leading spokesperson for the committee. She and Jackson eventually fell in love, and Davis became close with Jackson’s family. Davis had been recently targeted

by California governor Ronald Reagan, who pressured the University of California to fire her from her job as a professor because of her membership in the Communist Party. Upon receiving death threats, Davis purchased several guns for self-defense. As her relationship with George deepened, Jackson's 17-year-old brother, Jonathan, became Davis's bodyguard.

On August 7th, 1970, Jonathan walked into the Marin County courthouse during the trial of San Quentin Prisoner James McClain. He then removed a gun from his coat and announced, "All right gentlemen, I'm taking over." He gave guns to McClain and two other prisoners, William Christmas and Ruchell Magee. The group took the judge, District Attorney, and several jurors hostage, as Jackson hoped to use them as bargaining chips to free his brother. As Jackson and the group began to drive away in his van, San Quentin guards opened fire on them, killing Jackson, Christmas, McClain, and Judge Haley.

More than 3,000 people attended Jonathan Jackson's funeral. BPP members, including Huey Newton, spoke and read eulogies from men inside California

prisons. Later, speaking on behalf of his brothers' death, George Jackson said, "Jonathan took a calculated risk. Some people say that makes him a fool. I say this was the sort of courage that caused men of his age to be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor in somewhat different settings. The difference is that Jonathan understood very clearly who his real enemy was, the guy who gets the congressional medal usually doesn't. Now, who's the fool?"[2]

Ruchell Magee, the surviving participant of the courtroom takeover, remains in prison to this day.

[2] Remembering the Real Dragon: An Interview with George Jackson May 16 and June 29, 1971 published in Cages of Steel: The Politics Of Imprisonment In The United States, historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/jacksoninterview.html.

Readers of this zine can write Ruchell uplifting messages. Be sure to ask questions about his well-being, his interests, and his passions. Be aware that any of his mail can be read by correctional officers, so don't use any violent, explicit, or demoralizing language. Don't use politically sensitive language that could hurt his chances of release. Do not send any hard or sharp materials.

Ruchell Magee #A92051 #T 115
California Medical Facility
P.O. Box 2000
Vacaville, CA 95696-2000

https://www.freeruchellmagee.org/

Two months after Jonathan's death, supporters held a party at the prison gates of San Quentin to mark the release of George Jackson's book *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson.* The collection of George's writings over a six year period was Fay Stender's idea. Taking a page from previous activist lawyers, she knew that a successful campaign needs media attention. *Soledad Brother* became a bestseller, its success igniting a new wave of prisoner writing.

As for Jackson, however, he was eager to fulfill his duty as Field Marshall in the Black Panther Party, where he oversaw recruitment of prisoners to join the party. As a military rank, Jackson's title highlighted his "commitment to armed conflict as a necessary means of social change." And although the Field Marshall title was "more symbolic than practical," he did successfully recruit several people into the BPP and wrote articles for the BPP newspaper. He also co-founded a Black Nationalist Group called the Black Guerilla Family (BGF) which promoted racial solidarity and retaliatory violence against guards.

The threat that George posed to the burgeoning racist carceral regime was immense, and he faced routine violence from California prison guards. On August 21st, George Jackson was killed during a takeover of San Quentin's Adjustment Center, the most secure section of the prison. To this day, circumstances of the event are not entirely known. What we do know is after Jackson left with his legal consultant Stephen Bingham, he ended up with a huge Astra 9mm pistol. He forced the guards to open the cell doors of the Adjustment Center, releasing the 26 other men of the unit.

Three guards and two prisoners disliked by the other prisoners were killed. Jackson then rushed out onto the yard, a move that his comrades said was to “spare them the incoming attack.” Guards then shot and killed Jackson in the San Quentin yard. The other prisoners were beaten and held without any communication for days.

Quentin defense demands mistrial

Guardian Bureau

San Rafael, Calif.

Defense attorneys in the San Quentin Six case moved for a mistrial here after San Quentin prison officials leaked stories to the press implying one of the inmate-defendants had been caught attempting to escape.

Officials told the media that a "clanging sound" in the predawn hours alerted guards in the maximum security Adjustment Center (AC) section of the prison. Guards who went to investigate found that the bars on the cells of two inmates had been partially or totally sawed through, according to this report. Officials refused to say which prisoners had been involved, but stated that one was involved in a "current Bay Area murder case." Most of the local media reported it as involving one of the San Quentin Six.

Members of the defense team and supporters of the six Black and Latin defendants responded with anger and disbelief. Several pointed out that if anyone in the AC did escape from his cell, he would still be locked on the tier, inside a locked building, within the heavily guarded walls of a locked prison. "Where would anyone have gone if he sawed his way out of his cell?" was a common reaction. A prison spokesman suggested that the intent would have been to take hostages, but no weapons were reported found, nor did the prison claim to have located the tool they allege was used to cut through the bars.

What angered the defense most was the broad implication made by the prison that "one of the Six" was involved. "What they were trying to do was give the overall impression that any one of the Six might have been trying to escape," a member of the defense team told the Guardian. "This was a clear-cut attempt to prejudice the minds of the jurors just before final arguments begin."

The final arguments in the case are due to start June 21, and are expected to last two weeks. Then the jury will begin its deliberations. K.W.

Guardianphoto by Morris Wright

Some 200 people marched through Kentfield, Calif., last week, to "Free the San Quentin Six."

Six men from the Adjustment Center, known as the San Quentin Six, were charged with the five killings on the day of the takeover. Drumgo was among them. He would later be found not guilty, and was released in 1976 after serving 9 years on his original burglary charge. Luis Talamantez was also acquitted, and was released on parole in 1976. Willie Tate was also acquitted and released from prison in 1976. The other members of the San Quentin Six were less fortunate. David Johnson was convicted on one count of assault and only released from prison in 1993. Huge Pinell was convicted on two counts of felony assault and sentenced to life imprisonment. He died during a prison riot at New Folsom Prison, after having been kept in solitary confinement for almost 45 years and released into the general population just two weeks before he was killed. Johnny Spain was convicted of two counts of first degree murder and conspiracy to commit murder, but his conviction was overturned by federal judge Thelton Henderson because he had been shackled during the proceedings. He remained in prison for his original murder charge until he was paroled after 21 years.

Bato Talamantez, David Johnson, Inez Garcia and Sundiata Tate at a rally in San Francisco (The Freedom Archives)

Both George and Jonathan’s actions were markers of an increasingly radical and growing intensity of prisoner activism and organizing during the prison rebellion years. George Jackson's second book, *Blood In My Eye,* a manual of urban guerrilla warfare, was published months after his death. In the book Jackson calls for armed conflict against what he saw as the rise of racist fascism in America. His critique of the prison system and expanding police force as

tools of the fascist regime are still influential today.

"Free Angela Davis"

Angela Davis went underground after Jonathan's death. She was accused of helping Jonathan with the courtroom takeover and was placed on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list. In October she was caught in New York City and held at the Women's House of Detention while fighting extradition back to California. The CPUSA mobilized a campaign to free Davis. She faced the death penalty if convicted. Scores of supporters picketed outside the jail demanding her release. Davis, who received a tremendous amount of support from the other women she was incarcerated with, used the occasion to advance a larger challenge to imprisonment, using her defense campaign to draw attention to the larger crisis of racist criminalization and imprisonment more broadly. During a December 21, 1970 protest, women on the floor on which Davis was held chanted political slogans while a large demonstration in support of Davis gathered outside the jail. As the crowd chanted "Free Angela," Davis responded by shouting the names of the other women

on the floor with her: "Free Vernell! Free Helen! Free Amy! Free Joann! Free Laura! Free Minnie!"

The "Free Angela Davis" movement was the largest defense campaign of the time, and it united the international Communist movement with the global Black Power movement “in ways few others did or could.” After being extradited to California she would face trial and be found not guilty. However, her activism did not end there. She continued to fight against incarceration and became a leading figure in the prison abolition movement.

Occupy Alcatraz

Indigenous liberation movements were also in full effect during the prison rebellion years. Long before Occupy Wall Street, Indigenous peoples occupied Alcatraz Island, where the closed Alcatraz prison was located. Infamously known to have been one of the harshest federal penitentiaries in the country, Alcatraz closed in 1963 and remained abandoned until November 20th, 1969, when a newly formed ad hoc group, Indians of All Tribes, took over the island. In their proclamation, they offered to buy Alcatraz in glass beads and red cloth, the price that had been paid to Native peoples for Manhattan Island over three hundred years earlier.

But why Alcatraz?

The occupiers alleged that only by “seizing a physical prison, even a closed one, could the daily imprisonment of Indian life be made visible.” Their demand was for Alcatraz Island to become a Native reservation governed by Native nations. They planned to have a Center for Native American Studies, a spiritual center, an Indian Center of Ecology, a museum, and a training school for Native people. “We feel this claim is just and proper, and that this land should

rightfully be granted to us for as long as the rivers shall run and the sun shall shine," their Proclamation concluded.

During the occupation, Alcatraz became home to many different Indigenous tribes, along with Black and white and other militants, hippies, and several veterans who prevented the Coast Guard from docking on the island. They elected a council, gave everyone a job, and set up a school. Elders taught traditional Native crafts and arts.

The occupation lasted until June 11th, 1971. Although Alcatraz occupiers were not successful in their demands, their occupation not only raised public consciousness about ongoing struggles for Indigenous liberation and sovereignty but also offered an abolitionist vision of how carceral spaces could be destroyed, reclaimed, and repurposed for life-giving ends.

The Tombs (Cowritten with Ya'iyr Carter)

California was not the only state brimming with imprisoned revolutionary energy. In the 1970s, New York prisoners

were also fed up. Rats and roaches crawled past their bodies as they slept on the floor. It took at least a week to receive a mattress and blanket in "the Tombs", Manhattan House of Detention. Body lice was common and soap was in short supply. It was overcrowded and high bails held people for long periods of time. Put simply, the jail system was fucked up.

Mass arrests brought Young Lords (YLP), a radical Puerto Rican political group, and Black Panthers into the system. These imprisoned radicals held political education classes each day, which in turn emboldened imprisoned people to put pressure on officials to improve jail conditions. Of course, prison officials ignored their grievance. Under such conditions revolution was inevitable.

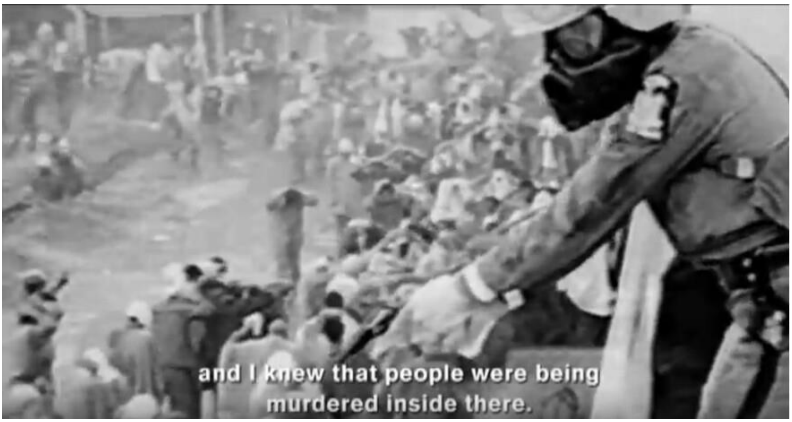
The rebellion started on August 10, 1972 when prisoners took 5 guards hostage. They smashed prison windows, sent notes onto the streets below, and demanded to see the media and the mayor. *The New York Times* printed their demands. Prison officials tried to calm prisoners by holding bail reduction hearings inside the jail. Then they transferred organizers to different jails, a common tactic from prison officials in response

to prisoner organizing. Their plan backfired. The rebellion spread to 5 other jails. Prisoners shared a handwritten newsletter, hung banners from the windows, and filed a class action suit against the city. Prison officials responded with repression: locking down city jails, stopping visits, reducing food portions, halting commissary, and denying showers. Initially the rebellion seemed to fail. However over the next three years officials improved conditions and limited pretrial detention, and prisoners in the Tombs successfully spread revolutionary organizing across the New York state prison system.

Attica

Imprisoned people in New York’s state prisons were also organizing to improve horrendous conditions. Many were veterans of the 1970 uprisings at the Tombs, and they brought their revolutionary spirit to the state’s correctional system, where they continued to express grievances, lead protests, and make demands. As usual, officials “stonewalled” them.

After George Jackson’s death, however, things escalated. Jackson’s passing had rippled throughout prison yards across the country, greatly affecting many for whom Jackson’s writings had served as both political awakening and guide for future radical struggle. Soon after learning of Jackson’s death, prisoners at New York’s Attica prison took over D yard, holding 32 guards hostage. They developed a list of 28 demands and requested a negotiation committee and television cameras to record their negotiations with prison officials. Individuals from the BPP, the YLP, journalists, lawyers, and others represented them as part of a negotiation committee. Members of the Nation of Islam, known for their rigid discipline, were tasked with protecting the hostages as negotiations commenced.



The Attica manifesto was read on camera by 21 year-old prisoner L.D. Barkley. Barkley warned that the events at Attica were a sign of abuse that was abundant in the entire country, stating:

> *"We are men! We are not beasts and do not intend to be beaten or driven as such. The entire prison populace - that means each and every one of us here - has set forth to change forever the ruthless brutalization and disregard for the lives of prisoners here and throughout the United States. What has happened here is but the sound before the fury of those who are oppressed. We will not compromise on any terms except those terms that are agreeable to us. We call upon all the conscious citizens of America to assist us in putting an end to this situation that threatens the lives of not only us, but each and every one of us."*

Prisoners transformed the yard into a radical commune spearheaded by a Black-led but multiracial group of leaders. They worked diligently to disrupt and mend the racial tensions that normally governed prisoner relations, which they

knew would only work to the advantage of the prison administration if allowed to fester. As the leaders engaged in negotiations, prisoners worked to provide food, medical care, and protection for themselves, hostages, and observers. Tom Wicker, a journalist for the *New York Times* and member of the negotiating team, remarked: “The racial harmony that prevailed among the prisoners—it was absolutely astonishing . . .That prison yard was the first place I have ever seen where there was no racism.”

Despite requests from prisoners and the negotiation team for New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller to meet with prisoners, he refused to do so. News came that William Quinn, the guard injured during the initial fight that precipitated the rebellion, had died. This news caused Rockefeller to move ahead with crushing the rebellion by force. On September 13th, Rockefeller sent in the New York State Troopers. Many of them brought their own personal shotguns. Helicopters dropped tear gas into the yard as the troopers fired into the crowd for ten minutes. When it was over 29 prisoners and 10 guards were killed in the retaking of the prison.

Once guards had retaken the institution, they tortured and humiliated Attica prisoners, making them strip naked and crawl through the mud, then run through a gauntlet of police who proceeded to attack them with racist epithets, gun butts, and police batons. Some of the leaders of the rebellion faced even greater terror from guards, including being burnt with lit cigarettes, beatings, and threats of castration and murder.

In 1972, 62 prisoners would be indicted and charged with over 1,200 felonies. Known as the “Attica Brothers,” the prisoners faced life sentences if convicted. Fortunately, with the help of activist lawyers and a powerful defense committee, they obtained the dismissal or acquittal of almost all of the charges. In 1976, New York Governor Hugh Carey pardoned all of the Attica Brothers who had pled guilty in return for reduced sentences and commuted the sentences of the two prisoners who had been convicted at trial. Years later, in 1991, the courts heard a federal class action lawsuit on behalf of prisoners in D-Yard, focused on the brutality that occurred after the prison was violently retaken. The jury found that the class’s

rights had been violated, although they were split over whom to hold responsible. Faced with hostile appeals from New York state, and endless delays and expenses, the Attica Brothers agreed to a settlement totaling $12 million, where survivors received a few thousand dollars. Given the extent of the state's violence against them, many considered this settlement to be far from adequate, even as it served as some recognition that they had been unduly harmed by the state's prison system as the state attempted to regain control after the Attica rebellion.

Marion Federal Penitentiary: Death by Regulation

The wave of rebellions led prison administrators and political officials to implement even tougher and more repressive systems of carceral control. In Marion, Illinois, correctional administrators were forging a new kind of prison aimed at social control and crushing, both physically and mentally, the livelihoods of political and politicized prisoners. The Marion Federal Penitentiary combined behavior modification techniques with long term solitary confinement. Rooted in

behaviorist psychology, especially brainwashing, the prison used a combination of sensory deprivation, medication, and prolonged isolation along with rewards and punishments to, as a former warden said, "control revolutionary attitudes in the prison system and society at large."

Those transferred to Marion included members of the Black Liberation Army and the Republic of New Afrika, as well as Chicano activists, Native American activists, white antiracists, and others. Within months of arriving at the newly opened institution, prisoners organized the Freedom of Expression Committee of the Federal Prisoners Coalition to "link political organizing with legal strategies in the courtroom." They formed a coalition with members of the ACLU, the NAACP, the People's Law Office (PLO), and others.

After a guard beat a Chicano prisoner, a multiracial group organized a strike that "closed the prison industries, burned cell blocks, and provoked a week-long lockdown." The prison placed 100 people in a new experiment of solitary confinement called a "control unit" to house rebellious prisoners from the general population. Locked down as much

as 23 hours a day, the control unit prisoners were denied access to prison programs, limited in their correspondence, and suffered abuse from guards. In the fall of 1972, the PLO filed suit on their behalf.

"After 18 months in solitary confinement, 149 were released back into the general population when they won their case on appeal in 1974. But while they may have won the battle, they lost the war. The suit failed to close the control unit. In 1983, officials placed the whole prison on lockdown - in effect turning Marion into a permanent control unit.

Unfortunately these techniques went on to "become a hallmark of modern American prisons." Around the country prison officials set up these units with names such as Security Housing Unit, Restrictive Management Unit, Special Management Unit, or Administrative Segregation" – all euphemisms for extreme solitary confinement. A new era of punishment was taking over.

Abolition

“How many years of people’s lives must be lost, hidden, and brutalized, before we see that prisons must be abolished.” – written by an anonymous author in the radical feminist newspaper Off Our Backs, 1971.

As a result of the prison rebellion years, national discussion quickly centered on the future of America's prisons. Although the reactionary, pro-carceral position conquered public policy in the end, at the time, radical political positions were just as popular. Some groups, such as the Weather Underground and the Black Liberation Army, even retaliated against government targets in response to the deaths at Attica and San Quentin. Many others were weary of the limits of prison reform and, in the midst of this flurry of prison rebellion and protest against inhumane prison conditions, called for the abolition of prisons entirely. The New England Prisoners Association, for example, declared the need to "abolish prisons as they exist and are used today" and replace them with "an alternative that will work."

Across the country, anti-prison activists in the free world mobilized to support prisoners and generate mass public support for the prison abolition. The National Lawyers Guild, for example, published a newspaper on prison issues called *Midnight Special,* where they featured prisoner-authored articles and legal advice. It was then distributed to prisoners all over, fostering dialogue and political education among imprisoned people. In Berkeley, a group of radical criminologists formed the Prison Action Project to "bring attention to the systemic oppression of the convict class," "develop methods for protecting prisoners from official retaliation during their struggle for justice and freedom," and resist "reforms which make prison a more effective tool of pacification." In 1972 they organized the Prison Action Conference under the title "tear down the walls."

Looking Forward

Nowadays the old timers in prison shake their heads and murmur that things just ain’t the same no more, that back in the day such and such things would have or wouldn't have ever happened. And it’s true, prison has changed. We are living

in a different era. The question is: how did prison change, and why? Or better, what can we learn from the past that will enable us to create a more equitable future?

After the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States in 2016, white supremacist reactionaries were emboldened to regroup and consolidate their power. A white supremacist was in the White House, amassing legions of discontented white folks as his followers.

But progressives had also been spending their time organizing and activisting. In 2020, the murder of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin sparked a new wave of urban rebellion against policing and prisons. Even in the midst of the COVID-19 lockdown, people took to the streets to protest America’s racist and oppressive carceral systems. “Black Lives Matter'' and “Defund the Police” became common calls as protestors battled with the police, burned down buildings, and were swept up in raids by law enforcement.

Since then, many progressives have publicly embraced abolition as a standard for creating change. To borrow

from Victoria Law, abolition is not only the idea of ending prison, but also radically changing societal structures and conditions to render prison obsolete. What would it take to create a world where police and prisons aren’t needed anymore? This is the task taken up by modern abolitionists.

Yet prison abolition is not a new concept born in the year 2020. During the prison rebellion years outlined in this zine, critiques of policing and calls to abolish prison increasingly gained traction. In those years, 250,000 people were held in American jails and prisons. By 2020, there were over 2.3 million people incarcerated in the US. So what happened?

As of this writing it is still unclear how much of 2020’s energy migrated to the people inside of prison. Incarcerated people have been kept on a strict pandemic lockdown, watching the events on TV and reading about them in print, but unable to congregate and organize under normal prison conditions.

Besides the lockdown, one of the most significant struggles incarcerated organizers face today is the defeatist mentality so prevalent among

incarcerated people. Since childhood, many of us have been conditioned by school and juvenile systems to submit to ‘authority’ and accept defeat. How many incarcerated people today think change is impossible?

But change *has* happened. History reminds us that prisoners have stood together in the face of tremendous brutality. They cared for each other, fought together, and some even died together. Many have sacrificed for the concessions prisoners enjoy today: religious freedoms, access to law library, even the ability to send and receive bulk mail have been won by battling the prison system.

In the past, imprisoned people’s radical calls to abolish prisons were eventually drowned out by powerful political reactionaries who forged ahead with the politics of mass imprisonment we see today. But this history reminds us that the current reality of hyper-criminalization is not a foregone conclusion or a natural outcome. And it reminds us that just as our forebears have launched powerful struggles against racialized state violence, so too can we do so today, albeit with updated tactics and within new political contexts.

It is my hope that those who read this zine will be motivated by the incarcerated people who stood up during the prison rebellions years and that we will continue their struggle and fight to make real changes to the system. Our elders have a right over us that we connect our struggle to its roots. When we do that we will see what has worked, what has failed, and will better theorize and practice what needs to be done.

I believe in you.

Safear Ness

Paul Lacombe is an incarcerated abolitionist artist currently sentenced to LWOP at the age of 19 in Delaware. He draws photorealistic portraits of historical figures and movement leaders as a way to honor the connection between past and present. He wants his art to be used to educate and unsettle people. Paul is also a gamer, a lyrical poet, and the kindest soul. He loves to meet new people and would love to hear from you. The fastest way to communicate with Paul is through GettingOut.com, where you can email or set up video visits. For snail mail, please use the address below.

You can write to Paul at:
Paul Lacombe-SBI 00605942
Delaware DOC-1101
PO Box 96777
Las Vegas, NV 89193

Safear Ness is a formerly incarcerated abolitionist, recently released from Pennsylvania State Prison. His lineage is traced through Indigenous peoples (Apache Chiricahua), Spanish colonizers, and white settlers. He still organizes against the PIC with incarcerated comrades, Study and Struggle, and In The Belly. His writing has appeared in *Jewish Currents*, Utopix, and the Asian American Writers Workshop. These days he is reviving In The Mix, a prisoner podcast he helped create while incarcerated.

Follow him on Twitter and IG: @Safear215

Follow In The Mix: Prisoner Podcast @Inthemix2021

Solidarity
By Ya’iyr

I dreamt of us standing
on a hilltop holding
hands washed
by a cool rain
smelling ozone
looking out
over a mass grave
blood and flesh
under a coating
of ash
silence
a battlefield
at peace
we won
I think